

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

LAOTIAN SECRET WAR EXHIBIT

INFORMANT: BLONG XIONG

INTERVIEWERS: SARAH MORRISON AND MEHMED ALI

DATE: JANUARY 13, 2008

S = SARAH

B = BLONG

A = ALI

Tape 08.13

S: All right. This is Sarah Morrison interviewing Blong Xiong for the Laotian Secret War Exhibit on January 13. Let's start off by where and when were you born in Laos?

B: I was born 1953 in Xieng Khouang, Laos.

S: And what was your family life like? Did you have (--) You lived with your parents. Did you have siblings?

B: Yes. I mean at that time, or right now?

S: At that time when you were a child.

B: At that time, yes, I with parents, and then I have four family, like one sister and (--) No, two sisters and then two brothers.

S: And where were you in the family? Were you the oldest, or in the middle?

B: I am the oldest.

S: You're the oldest? (B: Yes) Okay. And what did your parents do for a living?

B: At that time my father was in the army, and my mother just stayed home.

S: And your father was in the army. What did he, which side was he on I guess?

B: He was side the, what they call Royal, Royal Government in the free, no the democratic side.

S: So not the communist side.

B: No.

S: The other side, okay.

B: The other side that fight against communist, to the communist.

S: Okay. Did you go to school at that time when you were little?

B: Yes, in fact I went to school when I was probably ten, twelve years old when I start first grade.

S: When you were ten or twelve?

B: Yah, ten or twelve.

S: Oh, okay.

B: They start me late.

S: Hm. So what did you do up until that time? Did you (--)

B: Well mostly because hiding from the war, and also that, because the wartime and where I live, they don't have school. That is some of the reason, no school.

S: So did you go from place to place when the war was going on?

B: Yes. (S: Yes) We had to escape place to place for the safety, yah, safety place.

S: So was there a safety area?

B: Safety area, that's right, yes.

S: There was? (B: Yes) Was that in a specific town, or you don't remember the name of the area?

B: Yes, we run away from Xieng Khouang on the capital of the Province of Xieng Khouang. And I believe at that time probably 1958. I don't remember. We walked for three days. We don't, no transportation, no road, no. [Few words unclear] but doesn't, at

this point nobody to take, or get on and board a plane. The helicopter I mean, the helicopter. And we had to walk three days to the new town. Then we, we stayed there for a long, long time. That's not how, the village they call Pakow. That's Laos language, but in English they call White Mountain Village.

S: Hm. Okay. So that's where you went to, to get away?

B: We went to, yah, we stayed in the safety place, and also that we have school there.

S: Oh you did. Okay. So that's where you went to for school?

B: Yes.

S: And your brothers and sisters went to school too as well?

B: At that time they were very, very young, young baby. Only me at the time.

S: Because you're the oldest.

B: So, so later, yah, later in the year my brother also went to school there, but my sisters, no. They didn't.

S: Just to add on to the whole family part, I kind of, I didn't ask you about your grandparents. Do you remember, were you around them at all?

B: Yes, I remember. At the time my grandfather passed away 1960, '66 I believe, 1966. I didn't barely know him; a little bit and he had already gone, but my grandmother, she lived with us quite a time until the communist take over our country and we escaped to Thailand. And I came here to United States. Then I left my parents and my grandmother in camp in Thailand. Then my grandmother passed away I believe, yah, I believe 1983.

S: Were these the grandparents on your mother's side, or your father's side?

B: On my father's side. Our culture, our culture is mother's side, their parents not quite close as their father's side grandparents. So.

S: So you grew up knowing your father's parents more than your mother's.

B: Yes. Yes.

S: And what were their names? Do you remember?

B: My grandfather's name [Chung Kao Son] and my grandmother's name [Sayong].

S: And do you remember your mother's parents at all? Do you know their names?

B: I, no I don't. (S: No?) I already forget. I know before, but now I forget already you know. I'm not that close.

S: Do you remember your grandparents, your great grandparents?

B: No, I never see them, and I never see them, never know. So I really don't know what's the name [unclear]. It's quite a long time. So.

S: Yah. So they weren't around when you were little.

B: No, no.

S: So getting back to, you were talking about the war itself going on, and you were growing up. And you said you moved from where you were originally from to the safe area, and you were there for quite awhile. So what was that like? Did you know who was dropping the bombs at that time? Did you experience anything? Did you (--) Were you ever in the middle of conflict at all?

B: Talk about dropping the bomb that's because it means our side dropping the bomb to communist side. And I was the place that our side, I mean the Royal Government side at that time, I never get anything that bomb dropped to my, to me, my area, my family, but I heard the bomb. And I know someone that was a pilot and they dropping a bomb. I know that, because it's kind of neighbor and know that there was a pilot. And he was killed by plane crash; by the communist shoot him down. Um, yah, I heard about that. And when I was young about the war, I remember. I just remember. I don't know how I remember, but my father was not in the army and he brought home a rifle, and he just shoot when the, what do you call, our home that they have kind of a shooting point, and I can go dig the bullet for play. So that's kind of fun at the time with that. So.

S: So was he practicing in the yard kind of?

B: Yes. 1957, yah, 1957 I was a very baby, and he's young. So it's like that [chuckles].

S: So you could just go in the yard and find the gold.

B: Yah, find a hole and dig the bullet from the [unclear].

S: Did he ever talk about you know, what it was like in the army?

B: No, he never, he never talk about what the army, but that he's very lucky. His friends all killed, and he survived the war, and he came to the United States too. And he just passed away in 1996.

A: Kind of fast forward a little bit with your dad. When the communist took over didn't they imprison a lot of people that were in the army, or part of the government? And how did your dad escape that?

B: Dad just kind of smart. My dad's kind of smart move. 1975 the communist took over our country and I escaped to the city, and my parents escaped to the jungle. We separate for I believe three or four years. And I mean my father brought all of my brothers and sisters to the jungle, and my mother too, and then they fight the communists. And they call the, they called the Hmong, or something like that, they're fighting. And some how the [committee] fight back and they caught them, but my father act like a regular farmer, just, that's it. And then he didn't get imprisoned. And then finally I found them. They came to the city, and they lived in the city for probably a year or two, and they escaped through Thailand Camp in 1982. So he never got imprison. He didn't know he was in the army, then he'd probably be gone by death. Yes, gone by death.

A: By death?

B: Yah. They took away for what they call labor camp, but the choice is prison. Yah.

S: So he was wearing civilian clothes when they saw him? And they just (--)

B: Yes, civilian clothes. Just maybe the dumb people, whatever, like acting like very stupid people. So I mean very dumb people, so, and a very dumb person. So that's the reason. So a very smart move.

S: Yah, you said the family fought against the communist there?

B: Yah.

S: So how? Do you remember that part of it?

B: I remember, but I don't know exactly, but I heard about those people. [Unclear] escape to the jungle, because those are the former Royal Army, I mean what they call [unclear]. Because [unclear] I'm from Laos. I'm Laos nationality. Usually [a former] and part the minority. They are [Hmong], I am [Hmong]. And the Hmong people, they serve the CIA. So it means they still have gun, have bullet on their person, in there. So they run away with those things [unclear]. Even until today they still [far] in the jungle.

A: Really?

B: Yes.

S: I just read an article about that actually.

B: Yah, the Hmong people.

S: They're still there.

B: Yes, those people they use to work being serves as what they call the army by CIA. Helping, the CIA hired them, I should say that.

S: Right, and they're still, from what I read they're still hiding up in the mountains, (B: Yes) going from place to place (B: Yes) because the Laotian people are like after them. You know, they don't agree with what they did (B: That's right) in the war. So they're still trying to get them. Do you know anyone that's over there still, or no?

B: Right now I don't know. It's been a long time, and those are, yah.

S: It's pretty incredible though that they're still over there, you know, hiding.

A: Blong did you ever, did you or your family ever get discriminated against because of your Hmong ethnicity?

B: In Laos?

A: Yes.

B: Not a major, but yes, minor, yes, a lot. Yah, they have said, "Ah, you are jungle people. You're just like [unclear]." Those are very low class people over there. And you were dumb, you know nothing. Yah, a lot. Yes.

A: But you survived.

B: Yes, I survived.

S: That's what matters. So you said that you had gone to Thailand at some point? (B: Yes) Can you talk about that, about the transition from Laos to Thailand, and when that was?

B: That, 1982. February 1982. I have no reason why I still remember. I had to use, we don't have money, I had to use my motorcycle, give to the person that who can use this canoe and let me across from the river from Laos to Thailand with my two sisters.

S: Just you and your two sisters?

B: Yes, that's all.

S: So, all right. So where are your parents? [Unclear]

B: My parents, and my grandmother, and my (--) In fact my brother already went to Thailand before me. (S: Okay) Then I decided to go and follow him, and I took my two sisters with me. So we (--) I used my motorcycle to pay the person that he can use his canoe.

S: Right, to get the canoe to go across.

B: And we can go across the river that's very deep, very large river to cross to Thailand.

S: Did you have to, did you have to do it under secrecy like at night or anything?

B: Oh yes, yes!

S: Yes.

B: At night, and it had to be, you have to be, that person have to be, trust you, I mean helping you really, because a lot of people who crossed that river, they got killed because, what they call those people, they, they, you pay them but they kill you later on. They took your money too. A lot of people got killed that way.

S: They just wanted the money.

B: Yes, they just wanted money and they don't care. Because when you go through the middle of the river they just throw you out. That, seriously, that happened a lot.

S: It's the Mekong River?

B: The Mekong River. Yah, they kill a lot of people. Even, mostly they killed the people, and they kill Hmong people and take their money. Hmong, they, well the Hmong are considered, they're not very wealthy, but they have some. Mostly they have silver and gold. And those people are mostly Laos people who are living right at the river. They, what they call, they [unclear], and people like that, and they just kill Hmong and they take their gold or silver. But they also kill Laos too, the Laos who cross the river they kill, but that the soldier that kill. Either the soldier, they saw them and they just shoot. [Unclear].

S: So was the river guarded by soldiers, (B: Yes) or by the communists?

B: By communists.

S: And so that's how you had to, when you were going from one side to the other you had to, you had to have like a special, not passport, but you know what I mean, like document?

B: No, no! No document at all. You just go.

S: You just had to trust somebody.

B: Yah, trust somebody.

S: And believe that they could really help you.

B: Yes, that's it.

S: And then pay them, or like you said, give your motorcycle, barter, whatever to get across.

B: Yes, that's it.

S: So you made it across with your two younger sisters (B: Yes), and your brother was already over there. Was he still (--) Did you find him? Was he over there?

B: Yah, we found him. Yes.

S: And did you say your mother was there too already, or no?

B: My only brother that went over first, and my parents still behind, stay behind.

S: Oh okay.

B: With my grandmother and with one sister, yes, one baby sister.

S: And when did they join you?

B: Six months later. (S: Wow) So I got to Thailand and I hired somebody that the people in the camp went back to Laos and then brought them over. And I did not tell the full story. I left, I took my two sisters, but I left my wife and my four children behind.

S: Oh really!

B: [Chuckles] That's the difficult part, yes. (S: So) And six months later I brought my parents over, back. I tried to brought (bring) my children back. Her mother doesn't want they come. And finally I came to the United States. Three years later they be able to come to join me, but three years we separate.

S: So you went to Thailand, and then you waited and your parents joined you, and your grandmother, but you had left behind your wife and four kids in Laos, right?

B: Yes, and four kids in Laos, yes.

S: Now okay, to backtrack a little, when did you (--) Do you remember when you got married and when you started family?

B: We married in 1972. Yah.

S: And then you, so you had four children.

B: Yes, at that time. [Unclear], because we lived in the city until 1982. At that time we had four kids together.

S: Can you (--) What are the names of your four kids? When were they born?

B: Oh my oldest daughter, the first daughter, she was born December 1973 in [Banson] Hospital, because me and my wife, my wife she was a nurse [few words unclear] Hospital, because for the U.S. Government they we call USAF, U S A F, [unclear]. Then my second daughter also was born there 1975. Then soon after my, my second daughter was born then the communist take over the country. Then he go with, we went to the city [phone rings in background], because, because my wife's family there. They didn't see, and so we went there. And so her father also was a very high rank army in the Royal Government.

S: Oh really, he was in the Royal Government side.

B: Yah, very high rank. And so they have everything in the city. So we went there. And we lived in the city. Then my two, other two children was born; my son and my younger daughter born. My son was born in 1976, and my last daughter, she was born in 1978. So.

S: What was the name of the city?

B: Oh, first [Mokumbria], second [Calia], and my son is [Patai], and my last daughter is [Mikiup].

S: And, well I guess what, like did you meet your wife in the city where she lived, or where did you meet?

B: I met her when she came over to work in the hospital. So we met there.

S: Okay. And was she a Hmong as well?

B: No, she's Laotian.

S: She's just Laotian. Okay. So was there any friction between her family, you marrying into her family at all?

B: Yah, a lot of. A lot of, yes, because they always, say more people what do I call, those low class people like this, like that, and jungle people, but between me and her, she doesn't mind. And also her father, also they support her, but her mother, not at all. It's a lot of things. It's a lot of thing, but finally that depended the two of us and then we decide to move on. That's all. So.

S: Okay. So how did that decision come about I guess for you to take your two younger sisters to Thailand, and then your wife and your kids to stay behind? Was it just safer

that way to go in smaller groups? Was it because of money to get, it was too hard to get everyone across at the same time?

B: Yes. That, the money, that it was very hard to (--) First thing money, and second was her mother wouldn't let them go.

S: Ah.

B: So.

S: So that was pretty tough I bet.

B: Yes.

S: So you were over there in Thailand, and how, how long did you stay there all together once you got there, before you came here I guess, to America?

B: Probably a year. (S: Umhm) Yah, a year. I crossed to Thailand in February in '82, then I left Thailand September '83. Not even a year. Not even a year, so.

S: Yah. What was life like over there? Were you (--)

B: Tough. You stayed in a camp just like the prison. You cannot go over the fence. They have a guard with you. So yah, tough.

S: So you were guarded?

B: Guarded, yes.

S: So it was, was there refugee camps?

B: Yes, the refugee camp, yes, and very real small, narrow place. I mean narrow camp covered with fence, those wire fence. And I think 30-40,000 in there. So probably let's say two, two three square miles.

S: So really packed.

B: So very crowded.

S: Yah, very crowded. (B: Yes) And you were able at least to stay with your family though when you were there. (B: Yes, yes) I bet that made it a bit better, (B: Yes) because you weren't there by yourself. (B: Umhm) And then so when did (--) Did your wife and kids join you at some point?

B: Not at all.

S: Okay.

B: Not at all. I already came to the United States, and then they came.

S: Okay, so when I guess, when did you come to the United States? How did you decide, and how did that all come about that you were able to leave Thailand and come to America?

B: I have a cousin that came first. And they sponsor me. They say, "Come over, we sponsor you." So my cousin, he, at that time, oh yah, even right now he's still live in Virginia.

S: Oh yah.

B: So he sponsored me and I came over to Virginia.

S: Just you?

B: Just me and my older sister. Not older but the one of my sister that she was over eighteen. (S: Oh okay) The second one, that she not even eighteen years, they wouldn't let she come with me. So only myself and one of my sisters came here with me.

S: So you lived with your cousin for a time?

B: Yes, for a month or two, then we move out.

S: And then where did you go from there?

B: I still live in there for three years, until my wife and children came over. Then October 1986, yah '86, then I moved to Lowell.

S: Oh okay. So how did (--) Did they meet you here in Lowell, or did (--)

B: No

S: You went to Virginia first.

B: They met me in Virginia.

S: And then you came up here.

B: Yah, they came there because my wife she has a step-sister who live in Lowell (S: Oh, okay) before. So they say, "Come over."

S: So you knew people here in Lowell.

B: Yes. Yes.

S: Did you find it to be a helpful place to come? Did people help you when you got here, or what was the atmosphere like here when you, when you arrived?

B: I first came here at the time 1986. The help, not much, but easy to find job, because at the time the manufacturing, the thing that some people find a job very easy. You can walk this company, walk to another company, you can get a job. [Unclear]

S: So what did you do for work I guess when you first got here?

B: When I first get here? I work in, first I work assembly line in [company name unclear], [repeats name] company. Then I worked, I got two job at that time. And second job I worked in, used to be Lowell, I believe Lowell Hilton in downtown Lowell. Right now it's the Double Tree.

A: Lowell Hilton?

B: Yes, for four years.

A: What did you do over there?

B: Maintenance. (A: Really?) Yes.

S: Okay, let's see. Have you been back to Laos since coming here? (B: Twice) Twice?

B: Yah twice. The first time 19, no 2000, and then just last year 2007, early. Yes, it's early 2007 we went back.

S: Do you have family or friends still there?

B: Not my side, but my wife.

S: Your wife's side?

B: Her mother is there.

S: Oh, okay, she's still there.

[Ali is instructing them to speak louder because of noise coming from heater]

S: Okay. What was it like over there when you went back for the first time, and then last year as well? Was there a difference?

B: The first, well the first time very different from where I was before. Everything changed. I mean changed in more the construction. A lot of construction, very messy,

the roads bumpy but they, but that mean they fixing things like that. And all new people. I know no one. All new people. It's all different.

S: So is the culture pretty much still the same, or?

B: Very much. The culture very much the same, but the attitude of those people changing too.

S: In what way? What ways?

B: Usually when I was there, like before I came here, I mean before the war, Laos, Laos people usually be soft, honest, help each other, and not what they call, not selfish. But right now changing. Laos people right now selfish. No help, and mean, rude, what we call mean. I don't know? Maybe they probably thought, "Oh, those people from that other country, they are totally different, we don't care." Oh maybe they say that. So it shocked me, they culture itself, shock.

S: Are they, are they going to college, or are they going to school to, I guess is it more like individualistic I guess is what I'm asking? Instead of you know, being with the family and things of that nature, is it more you know, for yourself? You said selfish. So is that what you meant, the people (--)

B: I meant selfish mean they, there are some that will take from you. They wouldn't even care. They just taking and they don't care you. You can give them, they take it, but they're not appreciative. That's what I mean, they're not, not as good as it used to be with Laos people.

S: Take, and take what?

B: Take, what I mean, take everything. Money, things, yah. So, you give it, yah, they take it. They not thank you. They not appreciate you.

A: A lot less sharing?

B: Less sharing, that's right. Less sharing I guess.

S: So that was in 2000 when you first went back, and they (--)

B: Yes. Ah, last year.

S: Last year. Yah, you noticed the big change.

B: Big change it become. Probably I know everybody change. The world change and yah, like that.

A: Blong how are you viewed when you go back to Laos, you as a person?

B: Viewed? What? I don't understand.

A: Ah, do people look up to you? Do they look down upon you because you've left your country? What's people's response to you? Can they tell that you're even from, living somewhere else?

B: They know. They know where I'm coming from, but they just don't, they care less. Yah, they care less. And they just, you're just like a stranger to them, but they don't say anything. They don't say anything, well, just like that. Not warming. Not friendly.

S: Do you, do you think that the war caused that years ago, and it just kind of happened slow, gradually, or do you think something else is going on there?

B: No, I think probably from a couple of source like, what called the changing of the communication, the changing of the world, the changing of the (S: Technology?) technology, and also changing of the government, the way they teach people too.

S: Oh really. What way do you think they're teaching? What do you (--) What are they teaching that's different, or do you know?

B: They (--) Well I don't know how to explain, but the way they teach, they just teach you, they [unclear] hate the west. (S: Really) Guess so. Yah, so, but they hate the west, but they need the west. So it means they just want to take it, but they hate it. That's all.

S: It's a tangled relationship.

B: Yes.

S: Well speaking of, as we were talking about the Secret War and what went on over there, do you, what do you want people to know I guess? Do you want people, you know, the public here and all over the world to realize what happened over there? Do you want them, do you want the United States to go back and clean up the mess, you know, the old bombs and everything? How do you feel about, about the whole thing?

B: My personal, personal opinion, I don't blame the United States, because not United States go [invade] Laos. Because the common man of Laos called and asked for help to fight the communist, to stop the communist. And United States not bombing the Laos people; they're bombing the communist, Vietnam and the, the other side of the Laos, they call the Laos Dang. They mean the Red Laos, the communist Laos. And that's all. But finally because we always say they win the war, but no, they are the one who lost, lose the war and they ran away. The United States run away without helping the Laos, the Royal government, the communist take over. That mean, I want to, that's not what we say. Many people do not blame the United States. This is, no, not United States. The United States likes to do their job to helping their friend, but they just lose that's all. Um, but the, at this point they suffer people, I mean the new generation right now, after the

war everything, the peace came, but the bombs still there and they hurt those kids, those people who living there who farming there. That's true. Yah, that's true. But only thing if possible, if the U.S. Government can support or give some funding to clean the bombs. That might be help. But they don't blame United States. I don't blame the American people, no. They know nothing. They don't do that. That's only the government, the government. And the point why they lost the war, because the United States, the American people pay tax. And the government, the United States government take a lot of money bring to Laos, to Vietnam, Cambodia, but those government I can say, they take, instead they take 100% to help the people or fight the war, but no. They take 80% of the money and put it on pocket and they use 20% to fight. And they make the people, they hate the government because then when the communist came and then the communist used those what do they call, those things to tell people, "Hey, you know, your government, they corruption, they took money," like this, like that. "So really you help us, we fight, we win, that you will get [unclear]." They used this.

S: Propaganda?

B: Yah. And then the people, they believe those, that the reason we lose the war, because our own government there's so much corruption and then people hate them. Finally everybody lose. Yes, that's all. But my point is, please, American people do not, I do not mean, don't feel that we blame American people [unclear]. No. No. American people know nothing. They don't have anything to do with that, because the government tried to help the attack of the people. Stop the communist, that's all.

S: Okay. I don't really think I have anything else.

A: I got maybe a couple of questions if you haven't already asked some stuff about. Blong you've been involved in the Laos community here in Lowell. And how would you describe the strength or weaknesses of the community as of today?

B: The [unclear] mean the Laos people here, they came here so they have many, many different opinions and they do their own different way. They're not united together. They don't, yah, they don't agree, think together. And our community, especially our Laos community, they're separate, a different group that make our community really weak right now.

A: And how about some strengths of the community?

B: That's only one thing that we are the same, Laos and everybody still go to Temple. That only the two place that Laos can meet together and that the same Laos. That's all.

A: Okay. And you've also been involved in the organization called "Laos Family Mutual Association" right?

B: Yes. Yes.

A: Tell us a little bit about that, and some of the people that helped create that? Maybe the history of it?

B: Laos Family Mutual stems from Laos American Organization long before. They established the Laos American in 1980 I believe.

A: What was the name of that organization?

B: Laos American Organization. (A: Okay) And I believe until 19, that come from 1997 the Laos American Organization that disappear. And then me, myself and another couple of people, we get back together and we established the Laos Family Mutual Association.

A: In 19?

B: 1997. (A: '97) Yes.

A: Okay. Who were some of the other people active in the organization at the beginning?

B: At the time? (A: Yah) Me, [Cha Lun], [Kumsalon].

A: Maybe you can give us the full names so that we can record those.

B: Um, okay. Me, Blong Xiong; [Cha Lun (unclear)], [Kumsalon (unclear)], and I even don't remember now. So long ago.

A: And what happened to the original organization?

B: They ran out of funding, and they just disappear, I mean fade away.

A: And who is the important individuals connected with that?

B: Um, I don't recall that good, but only the last person Mr., I don't recall. I don't recall his name now.

A: And as it is today, there's some businesses, Laos businesses here in the community, right?

B: Some.

A: Which ones do you recall right now?

B: I recall the, I believe the Vientiane Market, and also the [name unclear] Market.

A: Okay, Vientiane is on what street?

B: Vientiane Market is Chelmsford Street. And [name unclear] on Middlesex St. And one other business that he does income tax and insurance, and Westford Street, that I believe BP Insurance, something like that.

A: Okay, and anything else happening in the community in a big way?

B: No. Right now no.

A: And how many Laos people would you say live in Lowell?

B: Many people always say, this we're only guessing there are 5,000.

A: Okay.

B: But probably less. And many, many move away, and then some move back.

A: Where did people move away to?

B: Mostly to North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kansas, some Midwest, some went there.

A: But some people come back to?

B: Some move back here, some knew people move in, something like that.

A: Great. I'm all set.

S: Okay. I think I am too.

A: Well thank you very much for your time today.

B: I thank you.

Interview ends